



[King Alpha's Song in a Strange Land: The Roots and Routes of Canadian Reggae](#). By Jason Wilson.

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020. 362 pp. ISBN: 0774862289.

Reviewed by Ty Hall, Carleton University

Music scholarship has progressively moved away from perceiving reggae as a homogenous conceptual category with a unidirectional evolution to embrace multi-faceted approaches that view it as a transnational hybrid. In *King Alpha's Song in a Strange Land*, professional Toronto-based reggae musician and historian Jason Wilson argues that rather than being a genre with a static mould fixed in Bob Marley's image, reggae is best understood through the lens of mobility. Tracing the roots and routes of Canadian reggae, Wilson demonstrates how music is built on a long

history of reimagining and reinterpreting texts for different places and times. This insider's look at Toronto's reggae scene during its golden era between the late 1970s and early 1990s draws on personal experience, interviews, and historical accounts for a polyvocal report of productive cross-cultural communication along Toronto's ethnic frontlines. With a nuanced account of reggae as a means for building and crossing cultural bridges, Wilson engages with issues that relate to specific notions of authenticity for a more comprehensive understanding of the genre.

The title of the book derives from the Rastafarian anthem "By the Rivers of Babylon" (1970) by the Jamaican reggae group The Melodians. Adapted from Psalms 19 and 137 and reinterpreted by artists from different backgrounds and genres all over the world, the song helps to articulate "the cyclic nature of Jamaica's people in motion" (p. 11). By the early 1970s, a number of influential reggae figures such as Jackie Mittoo and Leroy Sibbles had migrated from Jamaica to Toronto, sparking a vibrant reggae scene in the city. Canadian acts such as Messenjah, Sattalites, and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Rebels emerged in the 1980s through collaborations and interactions between Jamaican and Canadian musicians. Retracing the musical exchanges that informed the development of Toronto's multiracial reggae scene, Wilson deconstructs the faulty logic of the outmoded notions associated with reggae authenticity. This involves interrogating the discourses surrounding the genre that tend to classify it according to markers of race, ethnicity, religion, or culture without considering the ways in which musical styles develop in a dialogic manner. Reflecting on a range of

issues at the intersections of race and place, Wilson's account of reggae in Canada challenges conceptions of music, national identity, and multiculturalism.

Chapter 1 sets out to demonstrate the hybridity and heterogeneity of Jamaican music, examining some of the African and European traditions that spawned mento, ska, rocksteady, and reggae. Wilson intentionally foregrounds European and British influences that historians and ethnomusicologists have commonly overlooked to lay out a more nuanced assessment of the cultural currents flowing between Jamaica, Africa, and Britain in the early twentieth century. Chapter 2 traces reggae routes of the Black Atlantic, following the musical and cultural conversations that continued between Britain, America, and Jamaica after the Second World War. Wilson makes a convincing argument that the reimagining of musical traditions for local audiences and sensibilities has been a defining characteristic of Jamaican popular music that continued with the export of reggae in the early 1970s (p. 56). Chapter 3 takes an inventory of some of the push and pull factors that led to the wave of immigration from Jamaica to Toronto during the 1970s and 1980s to examine reggae's role in the acculturation process for Jamaican migrants. Despite the hardships and challenges of transnational migration, "Jamaica North" neighbourhoods such as North York's Jane-Finch Corridor, Kensington Market, and Bathurst's "Black Bottom" flourished across the GTA in the 1970s, setting the stage for the golden era of reggae music in Canada.

Chapter 4 examines the dynamic relationship between place and meaning with a spatial analysis and deconstruction of Toronto's reggae scene. The author traces the trajectory of "Book of Rules" (1979) by the Jamaican reggae group The Heptones, which has been reinterpreted many times over to suit local sensibilities. Chapter 5 discusses some of the commonalities between Jamaican, British, and Canadian cultures that facilitated bridge-building processes. Anecdotes and stories detailing intimate musical interactions between Jamaican and Canadian artists during reggae's golden era help strengthen the author's arguments and prove to be some of the most interesting and insightful portions of the book. In Chapter 6, Wilson deconstructs what he calls "the Marley Mould," which was adopted within the industry as a strategy for commercial success and has served as the model of an authentic reggae act since the early 1970s. With an admission that cultural mixing is never a tidy affair, Wilson directs our attention to some of the critical discussions started by reggae at the ethnic frontiers of Toronto to help create bridges to understanding.

In Chapter 7, Wilson identifies "keynote" sounds of reggae such as heavy bass frequencies, a slow tempo, syncopated rhythms, and off-beat skank guitar strumming that characterize its aural aesthetic (p. 209). The author champions bands like Sattalites, Messenjah, and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Rebels, who have embraced musical hybridity to create something new with meaningful connections to Canadian experiences and issues. While Wilson intentionally avoids defining a Canadian reggae sound, he lays out a notion of authenticity that moves beyond mere imitation of the sounds and themes of Jamaican reggae. Furthermore, some of the criticisms of Canadian reggae—that it is too fast, too clean, too soft, or too white—commonly resort to racially coded rhetoric that is

symptomatic of the problematic conceptions of reggae. Chapter 8 provides a brief overview of the decades that follow Canada's golden era of reggae to illustrate its ongoing cultural legacy and musical impact in the work of artists such as Tanya Mullings, Kardinal Offishall, and Bedouin Soundclash. While Canadian reggae may not have reached its full commercial potential, the author celebrates its role in facilitating a productive and enduring cultural dialogue and encourages artists to foreground Canadianness in their work. Finally, Wilson suggests that with an understanding of reggae as a transnational culture, artists and scholars can help broaden perceptions of the genre to make way for its future evolution and migrations.

The book's restricted scope is both one of its virtues and one of its drawbacks. While demonstrating an intimate situated knowledge of the Toronto reggae scene in the 1980s, there is little mention of contributions from other parts of Canada. At times, the author risks falling into the trap of using Toronto as a cultural representative for the entire country. This illustrates the disadvantages and limitations of using a nationalist paradigm as well as the difficulty of coming up with a viable alternative. However, since Toronto is the hub of Canada's reggae industry, the book does offer a convenient starting point for a more inclusive assessment of Canadian reggae. As the final chapter concludes the golden era of Toronto's reggae scene, Wilson leaves readers with the impression that there is much more to be said on reggae music in Canada and other parts of the world.

*King Alpha's Song in a Strange Land* is a vital contribution to scholarship on reggae and Canadian music and culture. Wilson makes a strong argument for academics and music critics to accept the plurality and multiplicity of reggae texts as they have done for other genres. For example, his ideas resonate with those of Charity Marsh and Mark Campbell who effectively trouble the ways we understand hip hop in Canada in *We Still Here: Hip Hop North of the 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel* (2020) with an intentional "loosening of knowledge."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Wilson disrupts many notions associated with reggae, leaving readers with a deeper appreciation for the music in Canada and all over the world. Balancing theoretical analysis with stories, interviews, and historical accounts, this accessible and informative book will appeal to musicians, scholars, and reggae enthusiasts alike who are interested in Canadian music and culture, the reggae scene in Toronto, or transnational migration.

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<sup>1</sup> Charity Marsh and Mark V. Campbell, eds., *We Still Here: Hip Hop North of the 49th Parallel* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 8. The term "loosening of knowledge" is from Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 29.